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ABSTRACT

The study concerning ways in which gifted and talented adolescents cope with their giftedness had three purposes: (1) to identify those strategies used by gifted adolescents to cope with the sense of feeling different from peers; (2) to examine any patterns of change in strategy use that might occur in various circumstances at particular ages; and (3) to determine what might influence the use of certain coping strategies among members of this group. Subjects (N=604 and ages 12-16) completed six instruments including the "Young Adolescent Coping Survey," the "Harter Self-Concept Scale," and the "High School Personality Questionnaire." Data analysis revealed strong effects for sex, age, and self-concept in the selection of coping strategies. The greatest sex differences in strategy choice occurred between the ages of 13 and 15. Gifted girls were more likely to minimize the importance of their talents, keep accomplishments less visible, and move away from equally capable peers as they got older. Statistical tables provide rankings of preferred strategies by age and sex. (DB)

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INFLUENCES ON STRATEGIES ADOLESCENTS USE TO COPE WITH THEIR OWN RECOGNIZED TALENTS

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A wide array of research focusing on adolescents during the past five years has made it clear that young people experience degrees of situational stress coping with the demands of early and middle adolescence. Few of these studies have examined the unique coping patterns employed by exceptionally talented youngsters who, like all adolescents, seek to minimize their 'difference' among their peers. In fact, most earlier research about highly gifted individuals has proposed that these students are among the most well-adjusted during adolescence and have no need to adjust. Yet clinical case studies by the authors and others have shown that belief to be misleading and inaccurate.

The purpse of this study was threefold: (1) to identify those strategies used by gifted adolescents to cope with the sense of feeling different from peers; (2) to examine any patterns of change in strategy use that might be occurring in various circumstances at particular ages; and (3) to determine what might influence the use of certain coping strategies among this group (eg., chronological age, sex, ability, self-concept, or concern about the perceptions of others).

METHOD

Six hundred and four adolescents (ages 12 to 15) composed the study sample. Subjects were selected from two large university-based programs serving academically talented middle school and high school students in the midwest and western United States. All subjects had achieved either 430 and above on the SAT-V and/or 525 and above on the SAT-M by age thirteen. Students were studied while participating in special summer programs on the two universities' campuses. 339 were boys; 265 were girls.

Most subjects completed 4 study instruments: the Young Adolescent Coping Survey (Buescher and Higham, 1985, 1986); Summer Program Background and Interest Survey; Harter Self-Concept Scale; and one content area College Board Achievement test in chosen area of study for the summer program. The first instrument used multiple approaches to ascertain each subject's preference, frequency, and reaction to eight selected coping strategies in a variety of posed circumstances.

111 subjects also completed 2 other instruments: The High School Personality Questionairre (HSPQ) and the School Motivation Analysis Test (SMAT). Both instruments were used to guage the current states of personality dimensions among this sample compared with an equal age but 'normal' peer group.

Data and results from these different instruments were analyzed both independently and as aggregates. Subjects were grouped along several dimensions: sex, age (12 and 13; 14 and 15), and program participation (special programs or not at their home schools).

A series of Chi-squares, correlations, and comparisons were carried out to measure the interactions among the study variables and to guage levels of influence on the selection and use of targeted coping strategies by these talented adolescents.

RESULTS

Results of the data collection and analysis can be grouped in several major categories: preferred strategies, critical influences, patterns of use, personality factors, and strong correlations.

Preferred Strategies. Of the eight coping strategies targetted by earlier clinical case studies as being used by gifted adolescents, four that had been designated as more 'positive' by the subjects were most often employed by this group; the 'negative' strategies were present but less frequent (See Table 1). Few differences were evident between both age groups (13 and under, 14 and older), although certain mean response scores indicated 'acceptability' kof a strategy were affected (See Table 2).

Critical Influences. Analysis revealed that gifted adolescents better accept being seen as 'different' and cope positively with that choice prior to age 13 and after age 15. Between the age of 13 and 16, a main effect for sex was evident: boys employ more strategies and rely on support from adults; girls employ fewer strategies and rely more on support from friends (gifted and non-gifted). Boys often select strategies that increase their visibility among the peer group; girls more often use strategies that sacrifice recognized talent for ready acceptance and 'blending in' to an increasingly diverse peer group (See Tables 3 and 4).

Self-concept measures across ages appeared to reinforce this finding (See Figure 1). All subjects dropped in Academic Competence and Physical Appearance at 13 and 14 while at the same time Social Acceptability and Global Self-Worth increased. Strategies employed by talented adolescents appear to respond to needs to be accepted and to retain positive self-esteem.

Program participation (being enrolled in special programs for talented students) also seems to influence the choice of strategies. While all students use similar strategies, those who choose to not participate have significantly different mean response scores. Patterns are apparent for both age and sex (See Tables 5 and 6); girls show more risk for using strategies that lead to dismissing the reality of their talents.

Patterns of Use. Consistent with findings showing a strong influence of sex, there were clear patterns of change across age for boys and girls (See Tables 3 and 4). Girls shift from having friends with equal talents and abilities at age 12 to cultivating friendships at 16 that are completely heterogeneous. Boys, however, maintain earlier friendships among equally-talented peers at age 12 throughout early adolescence; what changes is the acquisition of new (usually more aceptable) 'labels' within the school: sportsman, musician, actor, leader, in addition to 'gifted' or 'bright'. Boys rely more on adults as they mature; girls less so. By age 16, boys and girls who have retained active use of their talents are quite alike. The difference is that more boys than girls reach that stage; more girls have disappeared from programs for gifted and talented by junior year in high school (See Table 7).

Personality Factors. Subjects in this study appeared to be quite well adjusted when compared with more normal peers, yet there were significant differences noted. Talented boys and girls are more like each other than they are like their peers. Tables 8 and 9 present these comparisons based on data from the HSPQ and SMAT. Analysis of this data against coping strategy use suggested that strategy choice is also related to certain personality dimensions; more positive strategies are used more often by adolescents who are more independent and flexible, while less positive strategies are used by those who are more concerned with peer conformity issues (See Figure 2).

Strong Correlations. Multiple analyses demonstrated strong relationships between these adolescents' preferred coping strategies (both first and top three preferences) and two measured constructs: achievement and self-concept. Significant correlations were found between preferred strategies and five aspects of the Harter Scale: Scholastic Competence, Social Acceptance, Behavioral Conduct, Global Self-Worth and Physical Appearance. Adolescents with higher perceived competence employed increasingly more positive strategies. Higher and more frequent significant correlations were formed for girls than boys (Table 10) and for students fourteen and older (Tables 11 and 12).

In summary, adolescent girls with exceptional talent attempt to integrate more areas of their lives and seek more acceptance in a wider context than do boys. In this regard, the need to belong and fit in appears to be more of a driving force for girls than boys in middle adolescence regardless of the realities of exceptional talent. Finally, older students use more strategies (some more negative) while younger students use fewer strategies (most more positive) to cope with the demands of feeling different.

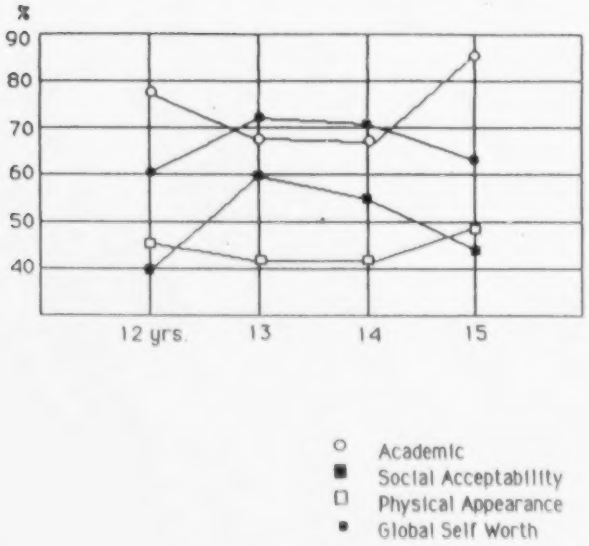
CONCLUSIONS

Analyses of the data collected for this study reveal strong effects for sex, age, and self-concept as key influences on the selection of strategies gifted adolescents use to cope with their own recognized talent. Changes in the use and frequency of coping strategies differ for boys and girls more between the ages of 13 and 15 and less so at 12 and 16. The study has found that gifted boys show a greater tendency to cope with feeling different by acquiring additional recognized 'labels' and staying in a set group of equally talented friends. Gifted girls, on the other hand, have a greater tendency to minimize the importance of their recognized talents, keep their accomplishments less visible, and move away from equally capable peers as they proceed through adolescence. The study findings do reinforce the normalcy of gifted/talented adolescents, demonstrating that these adolescents' efforts to cope match and parallel other important challenges to adolescents at this age: sagging family relationships, shifting self-image and self-concept, and increased desire to be perceived as normal yet competent.

Figure 1

Representation of Four Harter Scale

Subscores across the group's ages



MORE POSITIVE
ACCEPTANCE AND USE OF ABILITIES
SEEKING OUT AND CULTIVATING ADULT RELATIONSHIPS
AVOIDANCE OF ANY 'GIFTED' PROGRAM OPTIONS
MORE INDEPENDENT
MORE FLEXIBLE
GUARANTEEING ANOTHER LABEL AT SCHOOL
MASKING TRUE ABILITIES BEFORE PEERS
MORE CONFORMING
MORE RIGID
SEEKING OPTIONS FOR DEVELOPING OUTSIDE SCHOOL
ISOLATING YOURSELF FROM PEER GROUP
PERFORM POORLY TO LOWER OTHERS' EXPECTATIONS
MORE NEGATIVE

Figure 2
Suggested Model for Relationship of Gifted Adolescents' Eight Coping Strategies to Personality Dimensions.

Table 1

Adolescents' Rank Ordered Coping Strategies and Assigned Weights *

Rank	Most Positive	Weight
(1)	Fully accept and use abilities to help others	[10]
(2)	Acquire a second 'label' beyond 'academically talented' at school	[8]
(3)	Cultivate more adult relationships	[6]
(4)	Seek to develop the talent area outside the school setting	[5]
(5)	Avoid special programs designed for academically talented students	[3]
(6)	Mask one's true abilities in front of peers	[2]
(7)	Isolate oneself from the normal peer group	[1]
(8)	Perform poorly in classes so no one will detect your talent	[0]
	Most Negative	

* Not all 11 strategies were employed for analysis.

Table 2

Rank ordered Vignette 'Like Me' mean responses by study age groups

Ranking	<13 years	>14 years
	Vignette x response	Vignette x response
Most Like Me	"G" (1.63)	"G" (1.76)
	"B" (3.14)	"B" (2.83)
	"C" (3.71)	"C" (3.46)
	"E" (4.13)	"F" (4.44)
	"F" (4.56)	"E" (4.56)
	"D" (4.86)	"D" (5.23)
Least Like Me	"A" (5.21)	"A" (5.38)

Key:
- A = Perform poorly to lower others' expectations
- B = Excel outside academics but within school
- C = Mask true abilities with certain peers
- D = Act like a stereotypic 'brain'
- E = Cultivate friendships with adults rather than peers
- F = Avoid special opportunities in academics
- G = Use talents to help peers

Table 3

Weighted Rankings of Preferred 'Coping Strategies'
By Age and Sex

Rank	Girls				Boys			
Ages	12	13	14	15	12	13	14	15
1st	6	8	8	11	6	6	8	11
2nd	11	6	3	3	11	8	6	6
3rd	8	11	11	5	8	11	11	8
4th	9	3	6	8	3	3	3	3

Note: Strategies are

#3 Excel in talent areas OUTSIDE school
#5 Pretend abilities are not present
#6 Make friends with students with similar abilities
#8 Achieve in areas AT SCHOOL outside academics
#9 Select programs/classes for talented students
#11 Use talents to help peers do well in classes

Table 4

Distributing Choice of Strategy as 'Most Preferred' by Sex and Age.

Strategy	Sex	N	12 yrs		N	13 yrs		N	14 yrs		N	15 yrs	
			yes	no		yes	no		yes	no		yes	no
"Accept and Use"													
WGHT 10 (11)	Male	(58)	7	51	(101)	8	93	(122)	11	111	(38)	5	33
	Female	(21)	1	20	(77)	4	73	(76)	7	69	(16)	1	15
x^2 = 2.432													
"Choose Friends Like Me"													
WGHT 7 (6)	Male	(58)	9	49	(101)	11	90	(122)	13	109	(38)	5	33
	Female	(21)	1	20	77	13	64	(76)	8	68	(16)	0	16
x^2 = 9.140**													
"Select G/T Classes"													
WGHT 9 (9)	Male	(58)	2	56	(101)	4	97	(122)	10	112	(38)	1	37
	Female	(21)	0	21	(77)	5	72	(76)	7	69	(16)	1	15
x^2 = 2.145													
"Develop New Label"													
WGHT 8 (8)	Male	(58)	5	53	(101)	12	89	(122)	13	109	(38)	5	33
	Female	(21)	2	19	(77)	9	68	(76)	12	64	(16)	7	9
x^2 = 10.272**													

** $p < .01$

Table 5

Boys' Rank Ordered Vignette 'Like Me' Mean Responses by Age, Sex, and Participation

	Thirteen and Younger			Fourteen and Older		
Ranking						
	In	Not	Avoid	In	Not	Avoid
Like me	G	G	G	G	G	G
	1.821	1.483	3.500	1.810	1.676	2.063
	B	B	B	B	C	F
	3.009	2.966	3.625	2.929	2.947	2.250
	C	C	C	C	B	C
	3.670	3.483	3.625	3.619	2.973	2.375
	E	F	F	F	F	B
	4.189	4.207	4.000	4.417	3.947	2.250
	F	E	E	E	E	A
	4.208	4.621	4.125	4.583	4.351	4.817
	D	D	A	D	A	E
	4.538	4.759	5.250	4.976	4.816	5.125
	A	A	D	A	D	D
Not Like Me	5.075	5.276	5.375	5.106	4.081	5.250

Note: 1 = Exactly like me while 5 = Not at all like me.

Table 6

Girls' Rank Ordered Vignette 'Like Me' Mean Responses by Age, Sex, and Participation

	Thirteen and Younger			Fourteen and Older		
Ranking						
	In	Not	Avoid	In	Not	Avoid
Like me	G	G	G	G	G	G
	1.542	1.818	1.714	1.714	1.500	2.750
	B	B	C	B	B	C
	3.222	3.727	2.429	2.768	3.071	2.750
	C	C	B	C	C	B
	3.764	3.818	3.286	3.393	3.286	3.250
	E	E	F	E	F	A
	4.085	4.818	4.208	4.393	3.947	4.000
	F	F	E	F	E	F
	4.873	4.818	4.571	4.518	5.000	4.250
	D	D	D	D	A	E
	5.222	5.455	4.857	5.446	5.357	5.250
	A	A	A	A	D	D
Not Like Me	5.556	5.455	5.571	5.571	5.643	5.500

Table 7

How Bright Adolescents Differ
When They Cope With 'Feeling Different'

Age Period	Girls	Boys
12	Select friends with equal/ similar abilities	Select friends with equal/ similar abilities
13	Begin to look for 'labels' acceptable to other girls or boys	Develop skills and abilities to share within chosen group
14	Other 'labels' are sought that originate outside school setting	Other 'labels' are cultivated within the school setting
15	Recognized skills are used to gain acceptance in a heterogeneous peer group	Specific 'second label' is jelled and guaranteed in school among wider peer group
16	Choices are made in school that remove one from special programs--assure mixed group possess	Recognized abilities are used to assist peers in selected circle who similar abilities

Table 8

Means and Standard Deviations
for Norming Samples and CTD Sample
on High School Personality Questionnaire (HSPQ).

	Norming[1] Sample n 7,519		CTD Students n = 106			t for CTD Students Males vs Females
	x	SD	x	SD	t	
(A) Warmth	10.9	3.5	11.8	3.8	-2.4*	-.1
(B) Intelligence	6.8	2.0	8.5	1.3	-9.2**	-.4
(C) Emotional Stability	8.8	3.5	10.5	3.5	-5.3**	1.8
(D) Excitability	10.6	3.5	10.1	4.0	1.4	.2
(E) Dominance	8.7	3.3	10.3	3.3	-5.0**	4.1**
(F) Cheerfulness	9.7	3.5	10.3	3.9	-2.0*	1.9
(G) Conformity	11.1	3.3	11.9	3.3	-2.4*	-1.6
(H) Boldness	9.9	3.6	11.3	4.6	-4.2**	1.7
(I) Sensitivity	10.4	5.0	10.3	5.0	.2	-6.7**
(J) Withdrawal	8.6	3.1	9.0	3.1	-1.6	.5
(O) Apprehension	9.4	3.4	7.0	3.8	7.2**	-1.6
(Q2) Self-sufficiency	8.8	3.4	10.0	3.8	-3.6**	.8
(Q3) Self-discipline	10.2	3.2	10.7	3.3	-1.8	.3
(Q4) Tension	10.4	3.5	9.0	4.0	4.1**	-1.2

1 The data for the norming sample is based on adolescents of age 14 1/2
* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Table 9

Means and Standard Deviations for Norming Samples and CTD Students on the School Motivation Analysis Test

SMAT Factors	Norming[1,2] Males n = 1,899		MTS Males n = 62			Norming[2] Females n = 1,241		MTS Females n = 44			t for MTS Males vs MTS Females
	M	SD	M	SD	t	M	SD	M	SD	t	
Assertiveness	7.2	2.0	6.9	1.5	1.0	6.7	1.8	6.8	1.8	-.3	.3
Mating	8.2	2.2	5.1	2.5	9.9**	8.8	2.0	4.5	1.9	13.4**	1.3
Fear	6.2	1.9	4.9	1.8	4.9**	6.3	1.7	5.5	1.6	2.9**	-1.5
Narcissism	8.3	2.3	5.5	1.6	9.8**	9.5	2.0	5.8	2.1	11.6**	-.7
Pugnacity	7.8	2.3	5.5	2.2	7.1**	7.8	2.2	4.7	2.0	8.5**	2.0
Protect	6.7	1.9	5.6	2.2	3.9**	7.6	1.8	5.8	1.9	6.4**	-.3
Self-sentiment	7.6	2.1	6.2	1.7	4.9**	8.1	2.0	5.6	1.5	8.0**	1.9
Super Ego	7.1	2.3	6.9	2.4	.7	7.1	2.2	6.9	1.7	.4	-1.1
School	8.0	2.1	5.9	1.9	7.5**	8.1	1.9	6.1	1.8	6.4**	-.6
Home	6.3	1.9	5.0	2.5	4.8**	6.8	2.0	4.9	1.8	5.9**	.2

[1] Only integrated scores are reported

[2] The data for the norming sample is based on students aged 14 1/2

* p < .05
** p < .01

Source: Błaszowski and Kulleka, in press.

Table 10

Pearson Correlations for Preferred Coping Strategies and Harter Subscales by Sex of Subjects

Harter Subscales	Boys		Girls	
	First Preferred	Top Three Preferred	First Preferred	Top Three Preferred
Scholastic Competence	.196**	.231***	.339***	.332***
Athletic Competence	.0102	.135*	.304***	.158
Social Acceptance	.058	.060	.337***	.305***
Behavioral Conduct	.133*	.151*	.263**	.262**
Physical Ap pearance	.117	.237***	.240**	.190*
Global Self-Worth	.198**	.226**	.364***	.326***

* p < .05
** p < .01
*** p < .001

Table 11

Pearson Correlations for Preferred Coping Strategies and Harter Subscales for Boys by Age

Harter Subscales	13 and younger		14 and older	
	First Preferred	Top Three Preferred	First Preferred	Top Three Preferred
Scholastic Competence	.232*	.032	.171*	.316***
Athletic Competence	.009	.121	.032	.175*
Social Acceptance	.155	.186	.005	.011
Behavioral Conduct	-.003	.032	.207*	.211*
Physical Appearance	.162	.242*	.101	.245**
Global Self-Worth	.232*	.214*	.186*	.248**

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .001$

Table 12

Pearson Correlations for Preferred Coping Strategies and Harter Subscales for Girls by Age

Harter Subscales	13 and younger		14 and older	
	First Preferred	Top Three Preferred	First Preferred	Top Three Preferred
Scholastic Competence	.306*	.218	.426***	.456***
Athletic Competence	.270*	.182	.314**	.129
Social Acceptance	.239	.279*	.422***	.325**
Behavioral Conduct	.035	.095	.459***	.408***
Physical Appearance	.192	.107	.292*	.267*
Global Self-Worth	.281*	.195	.451***	.433***

* $p < .05$
** $p < .01$
*** $p < .011$